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SUBJECT: CHAVEZ CANCELS SOUTH AFRICA VISIT AT LAST MINUTE

REF: PRETORIA 02636

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Donald Teitelbaum. Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez canceled his long-planned September 4-5 visit to South Africa despite extensive preparations, according to Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) Deputy Director Annelize Schroeder (protect). Schroeder said that Venezuelan officials called on August 25 to inform her of the decision, citing "security reasons." Chavez was to visit Kenya, South Africa, Ethiopia, Namibia and Mali (reftel). Elements of Chavez's advance team had already arrived in South Africa.

¶2. (C) Schroeder said that South African officials were "extremely frustrated" by the late cancellation. They had invested significant effort and time into the Chavez trip, which was to be a State visit with a formal address to Parliament. Chavez's decision was particularly annoying since it was the Venezuelans that had been pushing for more than two years for the visit. Schroeder recounted, for example, a Chavez request at the NAM Summit in Havana in September 2006 to join Mbeki on his plane the next day for a surprise visit to South Africa, a request Mbeki politely declined.

¶3. (C) DFA Director General Ayanda Ntsaluba and a team of senior officials spent a week in Venezuela in late July to lay the groundwork for the Chavez visit. Schroeder, who accompanied Ntsaluba, said the Venezuelans were "very disorganized," "worse than the Africans." When the South African delegation arrived in Caracas, no appointments were scheduled. Only when Ntsaluba called the Venezuelan ambassador in Pretoria to complain did their schedule begin to fall in place.

¶4. (C) While SAG officials were frustrated by the late cancellation, Schroeder admitted that they were also privately relieved. The SAG had attempted to "contain" the Chavez visit by restricting him to Cape Town, which they hoped would minimize opportunities for public embarrassment. Chavez had requested to do a "walkabout" in Soweto to be "with the people," as well as unveil a statue of Bolivar in Pretoria. The SAG said no to both requests.

¶5. (C) Schroeder said the South Africans believe that Chavez remains relatively popular at home, particularly with the poor. However, his management of the Venezuelan economy and commitment to democracy "leave much to be desired," Schroeder

commented. Chavez has inserted his military allies in key ministry positions, and sidelined experienced, competent officials. Schroeder said that officials joke about the ForMin, a former "bus driver." Venezuelan officials told the South African delegation that Chavez expects to stay in power until 2030, the 200th anniversary of Bolivar's death.

16. (C) COMMENT: By canceling his visit at the last minute, Chavez made few friends in South Africa. The clumsy handling of the DG's July visit to Caracas also had an impact. While the SAG will continue to show wholehearted support for the NAM and G-77 policy agendas, they may be more reticent to follow Chavez's unilateral initiatives.
Teitelbaum